

Obama After Massachusetts

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Scott Brown's victory was a major victory for the Republican Party as it demonstrated that they are, at least for now, a political factor again, but in some respects it was less significant for the Democratic President and his party. The Obama administration, and his party, was in trouble before this special election given the ongoing economic problems, growing discontent with Obama's policies from, predictably, the right and, less predictably, the left, and a compromise on health care that only further angered these groups. The election in Massachusetts was additional evidence of a trend that was already strong, rather than a turning point of some kind.

For the progressive base of the Democratic Party Brown's victory is not as significant as many would like to think. The premise of the race, that a Republican victory would be the end of the 60 Democratic votes in the senate, was based on the fiction that Joe Lieberman was still a Democrat. The other premise of the race, that health care hung in the balance, did not resonate with many progressives who viewed our chance at real health care reform as having ended when the White House cut a deal with Joe Lieberman in December.

The Democratic defeat in Massachusetts, however, forces the White House to confront the political problems they face, some of which were obscured for most of 2009 by the extremist sideshow known as the Republican Party and the personal appeal of Obama himself. The Republican Party, while still extreme, can no longer be considered a sideshow and the personal appeal of Obama is beginning to lessen and has proven difficult to translate into meaningful progressive legislation.

The conventional wisdom is that the White House will now be pressured to move in one of two directions. According to this thinking, either Obama will need to move to the center and triangulate in a way reminiscent of the post-1994 Clinton Presidency, or he will have to move to the left, embrace more populist rhetoric and seek to reenergize his party's base. Both of these approaches make some intuitive sense, but neither would be a wise choice for Obama. Pursuing either of these paths would be bad for his political support and not deliver meaningful results for the country.

Triangulating was, in a very narrow sense, a successful strategy for President Clinton. It helped him get reelected and prevent the newly Republican dominated congress from doing too much damage, but with Republican majorities in both houses, Clinton had no chance of passing any progressive legislation anyway. Obama still has somewhere around 58 reliable Democratic votes in the senate and a majority in the House; and has a good chance of holding majorities of both in November. To settle for a triangulation strategy, which implicitly means not trying to do too much, in this situation would be conceding too much. Equally importantly, the current economic and foreign policy problems facing the U.S. require an activist president in a way that was not true in 1994. If Obama triangulates, and does not pass any major legislation, he will most likely

not be campaigning as an incumbent during a period of peace and prosperity in 2012 as Clinton was in 1996.

Adopting a more populist outlook and style is not a serious option for Obama. While the country may be in a mood where this kind of rhetoric would be appealing, and much of what is often referred to as populist would be an appropriate response to the financial damage of the last decade, Obama simply does not have the temperament or personality for this. Obama's reserved and thoughtful approach, his ability to understand nuance and his measured speaking style would make him a bad populist. Additionally, early signs that the administration was leaning this way should be tempered by the news that the administration is fighting to see Ben Bernanke reappointed as Chair of the Federal Reserve. This is hardly the stuff of populism.

The solution for Obama is to redefine himself as a centrist while continuing to pursue policies that are either centrist or center-left and are based on real solutions to America's problems rather than the products of strange and unworkable compromises. Anger from the AFL-CIO, frustration from liberal congressional leaders and nasty columns from left wing bloggers can be a Democratic president's most valuable political asset, but the President has not taken advantage of this. Obama needs to use this asset, but he needs to do it in such a way that does not alienate this part of the base. In other words, he needs to do his work, communicate with labor, congressional and other liberal leaders about his plan and his tactics and then reposition himself as a centrist using this anger from the left as evidence of his position. If this is done well, the independent voters will be more likely to move away from the right wing narrative, because Obama's personal appeal and the reality that his policies, for better or for worse, are centrist will break through.

The good news for the Republicans is that Scott Brown's victory made them relevant again, but the good news for the Democrats is also that Scott Brown's victory made the Republicans relevant again. Because, the Republican Party will almost certainly overplay their hand, as they almost always do. The Republicans, and their tea partying right wing, will likely see this victory as vindication of their views on Obama, and evidence that the American people do not want the federal government to help get us out of this recession. If they act on this belief by continuing to obstruct all legislation and ratcheting up their angry rhetoric, Obama will be able to more easily reclaim the middle, which is his natural and most comfortable role.